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Title	Covid-19 and the changing geographies of exercise
Authors	Cook, S and Hayes, SJ
Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/59739/
Published Date	2020

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Covid-19 and the changing geographies of exercise

By Simon Cook, Birmingham City University, & Sam Hayes, University of Salford

The lockdown and social distancing measures introduced in the UK since March 2020 have changed the way exercise happens in the UK. The **closure of gyms, classes, pools, pitches and courts**, the mass spatio-temporal restructuring of everyday lives, and the need to maintain social distancing have transformed the usual patterns of who, where and how people exercise. Some of these changes will be short-term but others hint towards longer-term changes and considerations, particularly regarding the **inequalities and politics of exercise** they illuminate.

Disruption often catalyses change and exercise routines have both been altered and forged anew since lockdown. The restrictions to normal exercise practices have seen homes become makeshift gyms, gardens become sports halls, and **living rooms become host to virtual classes**. Lockdown has also afforded possible opportunities for some to establish new exercise routines through the gift of time, one of the **biggest barriers to exercise**. This has enabled many to start running, walking, cycling and other forms of exercise or to undertake exercise more regularly than would otherwise have been the case.

Sport England have been **researching people's changing activity levels and attitudes towards exercise on a week-by-week basis since lockdown**. In the first week of April 2020, 31% of adults did more physical activity than before restrictions were in place, and these levels have generally increased. In the last week of May 2020, 64% of adults in England walked, 22% ran, 14% cycled and 45% did home-based exercise.

While time is important in understanding this increase, it is not the sole factor. The state-sanctioning of exercise, it being one of the few reasons you can leave your house, has **encouraged the uptake of exercise for some**, with being outside and doing *something* perhaps as of much interest here as actually exercising. In doing so, some have also found spaces to be more appealing to exercise in than they previously were (such as **quieter roads** offering safer spaces for cycling), while others have found exercise to be a useful means of accomplishing other things (such as visiting friends or undertaking chores) that may not be permitted without the involvement of exercise.

Health is key too in understanding exercise's popularity during lockdown. While the **physical benefits of exercise** certainly play their role, it is perhaps the **mental health benefits of doing exercise and being outdoors** that have been so desired. Lockdown and living with a pandemic have **exerted mental health pressures upon millions** and exercise has become important for many in helping overcome the anxieties, stresses, fatigues and boredoms of lockdown.

Yet the benefits people derive from these new/altered exercise routines extend beyond just health, there is a tangible geographical pleasure too. David Bissell outlined the **changing senses of place** since Covid-19, something quite acute in regular exercise. The ask for exercise to remain local has seen the spatiality of exercisers' routes shrink and many have used this opportunity to explore their locale in more detail,

finding new routes or even challenging themselves to **run every street in their neighbourhood/area**. Such new exercise geographies feed into the wider reorientation of place being experienced during Covid-19.

Politics of exercise during social distancing

However, these benefits are not universal. For many, lockdown has meant a severe reduction in exercise. In the first week of April 2020, **41% of adults did less physical activity** than before lockdown restrictions. **Familiar inequalities in physical activity** have been replicated and exacerbated during lockdown with **Sport England** demonstrating that “women, people from lower socio-economic groups, older adults, people with a long term condition, illness or disability, and people from some BAME communities – are still finding it harder to be active”.

Similarly, inequalities of income, class and race in relation to accessing and experiencing outdoor space have been exposed during lockdown too. Many positives of the changing exercise routines noted above are reliant on such access and experiences, but these are not equal. Access to **gardens** and **good quality public green space**, **treatment in public green spaces** and **policing in public spaces** are all sources of social division, with BAME communities generally experiencing poorer access and treatment. For enabling exercise and the benefits it brings, these things matter. For many, the importance of access to public green spaces as places for physical activity has increased during lockdown. Yet the requirements to maintain social distancing has heightened pressures on the already unequal allocation and occupation of these spaces. Lockdown has illuminated and intensified the politics of exercise that are in critical need of attention.

The notion of **‘affective atmospheres’** is helpful in exploring some of the more complex and lived politics of exercise emerging during this crisis. Anna Barker and colleagues described the atmosphere of the public park as enabling ‘convivial encounters’ and providing spaces to see the diversity of a community. Far from evoking the image of a deliberative democratic space, think speakers’ corner in Hyde Park London, they argue that **well managed public parks can offer subtle opportunities for mixing** which allow community sharing of space whilst also respecting privacy. An idea being tested at this time as we try to live ‘together-apart’.

Indeed, evidence that this atmosphere of convivial encounters has been tested to its limit comes if we examine some of the ways we have started to judge others using these spaces during lockdown. Runners have found themselves partly at the centre of this moral atmosphere (e.g. **joggers versus walkers**). Sam attempted to capture some of his **thoughts** on this, and recorded some of these emotions in a running diary. After a run early in lockdown (27 March) he wrote:

I decide when I get to Jackson’s Bridge to carry on towards Chorlton Water Park. Partly because at least here I can see that the path is relatively clear, and I don’t really want to stress about meeting people. And that’s the feeling as the run progresses, gradually building tension and stress that I will bump into people and be perceived as a ‘bad’ runner. Huffing and puffing past people.

What had been a space of convivial encounters has taken on a new atmosphere of anxiety and judgement. Such judgement of so called ‘Covidiot’s’ has been observed as we have started to **police each other’s use of public spaces**. Runners came in for criticism for breathing and passing others in ways which were perceived to be dangerous. Science has been used to **scandalise**, **report** and **temper** these

criticisms, as the press lifecycle of one Belgian research study into the aerodynamics of droplets shows. Running has become a riskier practice to undertake during this crisis, adding extra hazards to what is already a potentially dangerous practice, particularly for women, **who face regular harassment on the streets**, and people of colour, whose running bodies are often prejudicially misinterpreted as dangerous and alarming, sometimes **with fatal consequences**. Running may be a more fraught practice now, but not all running bodies are subject to equal judgement, moralising and abuse. Exercise is not always a source of enjoyment and pleasure.

With heightened health concerns, increased pressures on outdoor spaces and social distancing; encounters and passing have also become more fraught and taken on new prominence. Before lockdown, runners passing other pedestrians and road users was already complex, a sort of mobility hierarchy expressing the micro-politics of space. **Simon and colleagues** have identified common options for runners navigating these interactions; from ‘choosing a side’, to ‘stepping down’ (onto the road) and even the potentially clumsy, ‘slalom’. In times of social distancing who moves out of the way and how we co-ordinate each other’s actions means that passing has become both “**more difficult and more morally charged**”.

How lockdown has changed our exercise habits for good or ill, impacted on related inequalities and our relationship to space and place is still evolving, but what is clear to us is that lockdown has introduced not just spatial or temporal constraints but also whole new moral, political and emotional geographies of exercise. We argue that far from being trivial, our **#DailyExercise** has taken on increased significance under lockdown as it has come to embody everything from moral standing to our rights to space.

About the authors: **Simon Cook** is a human geographer at **Birmingham City University**. His research concerns everyday active practices: the ways in which they happen, how they change, and what they can tell us about societies and spaces. He is currently researching run-commuting, multi-modal mobilities, post-collision cycling practices and running during social distancing. He tweets **@SimonIanCook** and blogs at **www.jographies.wordpress.com**. Dr **Sam Hayes** is a research fellow at the **University of Salford**. He works on Geography and Planning, with an interest in how we use, value and experience green spaces from urban parks to national parks. His **current research** focuses on how exercise – specifically running – comes together with green spaces to offer mental health or wellbeing benefits. He is interested in exploring the politics of green spaces and their emotional and experiential qualities. He tweets **@DrSamHayes1** and blogs at **www.environmentalistblog.wordpress.com**.

Suggested further reading

Coen, SE, Davidson, J, Rosenberg, MW. (2020). Towards a critical geography of physical activity: Emotions and the gendered boundary-making of an everyday exercise environment. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **<https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12347>** – also see the Geography Directions post linked to this article **here**.

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